

**THE PAIN OF FAMILY**  
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Luke 15:11-32

- <sup>11</sup> And he said, A certain man had two sons:
- <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.
- <sup>13</sup> And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.
- <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.
- <sup>15</sup> And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.
- <sup>16</sup> And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.
- <sup>17</sup> And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!
- <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,
- <sup>19</sup> And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.
- <sup>20</sup> And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.
- <sup>21</sup> And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.
- <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:
- <sup>23</sup> And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:
- <sup>24</sup> For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.
- <sup>25</sup> Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.
- <sup>26</sup> And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.
- <sup>28</sup> And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.
- <sup>29</sup> And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:
- <sup>30</sup> But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.
- <sup>31</sup> And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.
- <sup>32</sup> It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

When Helmut Thielicke, the great German preacher, preached on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, he started with a story of his son who was very young, not quite a year old. Thielicke set his son down in front of a large glass mirror to see what he would do. His son looked at himself, evidently very happy to see another little boy there to play with. He made his small gestures, said Thielicke, toward the mirror of himself, reaching at times, flailing his tiny arms at times, moving his head about as he enjoyed what he was seeing. But, then an amazing thing happened. The young son suddenly noticed that his gestures matched the gestures in the mirror, and according to Thielicke, he stopped and just stared, as if he recognized that he was seeing himself. He stared at that mirror as if to say, "That's me. I'm looking at myself."

Then Thielicke made this point: When we look at any story in the life and ministry of Jesus, we are in the true sense, looking at ourselves. He concluded that the Story of the Prodigal Son was the story of ourselves, and that to be true to Scripture, we must look at the story or parable or event in Scripture in just that way. In all of Jesus' dealings with others, with the sick, the blind, the lame, the leper,--in all these instances, according to Thielicke, when I read Scripture, I am looking at myself, I am seeing myself.

As I was going through my Bible Reading Schedule this week, I came upon this old but ever new story, this immortal short story, that our Lord, the greatest story teller of all time, told those listening to Him one day at the lakeside where He often taught. I was touched by it, again, as I had been before, but in a different way. It was about family, I reasoned, and about the pain of family, and I thought about the pain in the life of my own family, and knowing you so well, about the pain of family in your lives. And then it occurred to me that Pain and Love always go together, for, where there is Love, there must be Pain. In this oh so familiar story we find several instances of family pain.

### **The Pain of Being A Responsible Parent**

In the story of the Prodigal Son we read the words *a certain man had two sons*. The Bible tells us that children are an heritage of the Lord; so, they are God's gift to us, they are the renewal of family, they are a living presentation of who we are, reflections of us in the mirror of life. This father had two sons, and they both reflected and resembled him, and it was his responsibility to be a good parent, a responsible parent. However, notice here the PAIN OF BEING A RESPONSIBLE PARENT.

He had two sons and had to be a responsible parent to both sons. And were these sons different: One son responsible himself, and willing to help with the household duties of the large farm his father owned; the other son, a younger son, still like his father, yet in his desire to be free, to be himself, to be his own man, to make it on his own without the father's helpful interference, was an extremely rebellious lad indeed!

This rebellious son, this younger son, who was probably a teen ager, mustered enough self confidence to demand his freedom, to request his 1/2 of the amount his older brother would inherit, to go into the far country with adequate money to sustain himself comfortably, and perhaps, in his mind, become himself even more successful than his

father. He got what he requested. The father divided with him the inheritance. Now one wonders if the Father was a Responsible Parent. After all, should he not have set down with the boy and pointed out to him the stupidity, and seriousness and the danger of his decision? Was the Father a Responsible Parent?

Jesus answers that question in the affirmative, the Father was being totally responsible, for he was giving his son the gift of freedom to be a man, to follow his dream, and even though Jesus will later tell us that the young man failed and failed miserably. In some senses Jesus is saying to us all, that it is far more responsible to absorb the pain of parenthood and let the child find life for himself; let him experience the hard facts of life and learn from them; let him learn that freedom is a double-edged sword, and that the terrors of freedom are every bit as great as the joys of freedom.

The Pain of Being a Responsible Parent must have become full-fledged suffering in the father's anxious imaginings of his son's suffering. All those wasted years, all those torturous days and nights of longing for his son, wondering where he was, wondering how he was doing, and being able to do nothing to help his son and being unable totally to have any kind of parental control over his son's situation. Perhaps he heard from travelers who had seen him, heard of him, or heard tales of his son's lewd, luxurious, and dissipated lifestyle; but in giving his son freedom, he relinquished his control. The pain was a constantly aching pain, looking always for his son's return which he was helpless to make happen.

Like him, we have some control over our children. We protect them from pain all we can, we hide them from hurt, and shelter them from the smarting shafts of suffering. But that suffering we endure is the price Love demands as payment for being a parent. It is The Pain of Family. One cannot be A Responsible Parent without pain. One cannot love without pain. To feel the hurt of our children, and to feel their hurt even when they are not hurting, but we imagine they are. Jesus is telling us in this story that being a Parent brings with it pain, The Pain of Family. As a parent this father is a mirror of myself.

### **The Pain of Becoming A Real Self**

But in this story we see plainly the pain of the son, THE PAIN OF BECOMING A REAL SELF. Born and raised in East Kentucky, I know how hard it is to be an individual self, a struggle that everyone here has but that seems more prominent with males. Living and growing up in a community where everyone is family, where everyone knows everyone else, where everyone knows everyone else's business, where there are very few secrets, is hard enough. But when your only identity is related to whose son you happen to be, then your worth is based on the worth of your father. Thank God I had a good father. But I knew that I needed to establish my own identity.

Now look at this 'younger brother.' I can identify with this younger son, can't you? When I see him here in Scripture, I see myself in my struggle to become a real self. Here is a young man, barely old enough to be called a man, wanting to strike out on his own;

and while we cannot accept his brashness before his father, we must respect his courage, and while we cannot accept his rebelliousness, we must at least honor his adventurousness. Like this young man, I went to a 'far country' to Dayton, Ohio, without my Father's resources, staying with my brother until I had enough money to get my own rented room. If I had an inheritance like him, I might have fallen just as low as he fell.

In a few telling strokes, our Lord show us what soon, too soon, happened. Listen to our Master Storyteller:

Luke 15:13 "And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. <sup>15</sup> And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup> And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him."

Our Lord puts no time line to his story, but we can assume that The Pain of Becoming a Real Self in this 'far country' was years instead of months and days. The young man had friends aplenty as long as he had the hard earned money of his father. He wore nice clothes, lived luxuriously, had all the female companions he wanted, had all the addictive drugs he felt he needed, and, for a while, lived what he considered the good life in the city.

But soon, for him, the party was over, the dream became a nightmare, and he had become the 'real self' that all self-sufficient selves become when they leave the father's house. Now he was suffering the pain of family, the pain of rejection of family, and it's inexorable and inevitable consequence, estrangement from true selfhood. He had been the son of a prosperous farmer, now he was the scum of the earth, precisely because he had chosen the scum of life in a far country to hard work and home life. He made his choice, and now he was the prisoner, the victim, of his ill-fated choice.

Still, he was a son; still he had a father; still in the bleakness of his isolation and imprisonment, feeding pigs, the final slap in the face of fate to a Jewish lad; still in his mind and in his heart; he held the memory of better times. In the blackest night of his existence, where no stars shone in a cold and forbidding sky, the pain of family broke in upon his memory, and he saw himself back home playing down by the creek with his older brother and his friends under the bronzed sky of a warm summer evening after he had done his father's bidding.

He remembered the sounds of the farm that were real sounds of nature, not the manufactured sounds of the city. He remembered, too, that working conditions were good on his father's farm, and in his hunger he could see the sumptuous meals set by the servants at the day's end when all the work was done. And he saw the contrast between his father's home and this 'eating pods to keep from starving to death,' and 'knee-deep in slime.' In the process of becoming a real self he had almost become a 'no self.'

## The Pain of Repentance

But here in the Parable of the Prodigal Son we see again the pain of family in THE PAIN OF REPENTANCE. How does a proud son of a princely father say, "I'm wrong! forgive me!" How painful is that? Yet that is precisely what this story is all about. It is 'getting it right with the family.' The Father's pain was caused by Love; the Son's pain by lust: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. The Father's pain was centered in his son; the son's pain was centered in himself. The Father's pain was based on the loss of his son; the son's pain was based on the loss of self, the loss of soul.

Anyway, as the great poet James Weldon Johnson so aptly put it, it was 'blacker than a hundred midnights down in the Cyprus swamp' to this poor lost prodigal son, in the pigsty with the most unclean of all creatures (except, perhaps, man), and regressing to childhood before he could find a glimmer of hope on which to fasten his poor soul. But he saw it, that faint glimmer in the darkest hour of his midnight, 'the blessedness of home.' Listen as our Lord tells the story:

<sup>15</sup> "And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup> And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. <sup>17</sup> And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, <sup>19</sup> And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. <sup>20</sup> And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

In the pain of his extremity, he thought of home. Like the Psalmist of old, Psalms 18:6:

<sup>6</sup> In my distress I called upon the Lord,  
and cried unto my God:  
he heard my voice out of his temple,  
and my cry came before him, even into his ears.

Just as the Psalmist thought of God, the prodigal son thought of his father. Just as the Psalmist found relief from his pain, the prodigal son, to alleviate his self-induced-pain, must find his father. There is hope at home. He has become a slave of men, as Thielicke so eloquently writes, and now he is willing to be a slave, a bondslave, of his father, if only his old father will receive him as a slave. In his mind, too, he must have remembered times when his father had given other 'losers' a second chance and third chance.

He is nearing the most important decision in his life. He vacillates, perhaps, for this is a humiliating and painful step for a proud son, now in rags and tatters.. But then he cries, I will, I will go back. He is still my father, and maybe he will at least receive me as a slave!" The moment he resolved that, the moment he said, "I will arise and go to my father," he was on the road to reconciliation and forgiveness, even if his worn out, floppy

sandals had never touched the dusty road. But do you realize the power of this cry? Can you hear the trumpet sound of triumph in this cry? It is so powerful that all hells angels shuttered and turned their backs to this cry, and covered their heads with their jet black robes, while the devil himself cried, "No! No! No!" The same sinful will that took him from his father's house, must now arise in the strength of the Lord God and cry out with a hurricane blast, "I will arise!" That resolve, that decisive resolve, brought him halfway home, but he still had to walk the rest of the way, for no one would let such a wretch ride: "and he arose and came to his father.."

Now he had a nice little sermon prepared for his father, but his father didn't need a sermon, he needed a son! For the lost son was a great pain, a great burden, but a found son, who was alive, who, in rags and filth, bowed before him, was a son indeed, for he had learned the most important lesson life has to teach, the importance of family, the importance of home. And, as someone so aptly said, the father did not give his son a sermon either, but instead ordered veal and wine, and gave a party filled with feasting, music and dancing.

### **The Pain of Acceptance**

And this great homecoming feast should end the story, but it doesn't. Family Pain exists still, for in the story we see THE PAIN OF ACCEPTANCE. The older brother who has been so faithful for so many years, cannot find it in his heart to forgive either his profligate, stupid, bungling brother or his father's seemingly permissive attitude in forgiving his younger sibling. So, in the presence of this great Repentance Party, he stages his Pity Party, and will not offer his brother the right hand of fellowship, will not accept that any change whatever has happened to this profligate and broken man before him, who, through all the marks of pain and suffering, still resembles his father, and alas, resembles the older brother too..

See here the great contrast. The father is the loser, not the older brother, for it was the father's resources that the prodigal son squandered. Yet the older brother did all the griping and all the groaning and complaining. And the father implored the older brother with the words, "All that I have is yours...". In a word, "You will have everything. All that I have left belongs to you, and is yours to inherit. As my oldest son you will receive everything I own." But the older brother never accepted, never forgave.

Now the story ends. But it does not really end: for so long as man is man, a rebel and a sinner, it never ends. Do you see yourself in this story? You are there. I am there. You see, we are the prodigals. We alone must write the ending of this story, for it is about us. God is the Father. And the Farm of Home is Heaven, which in this life, is Peace with God. We have all shaken our fists in the face of the Father, and said, "I'll show you! I can make it on my own! I will make it on my own!" But whatever we lose and whatever we gain can only give us pain and occasional pleasure. Nothing satisfies the human soul but being at Home with the Father. That comes through repentance, and through faith that the Father will receive us after we truly repent. Let us not be too hard on the Elder Brother, however, for we, if we truly are forgiven, wonder so often, "Why would the Father so

easily forgive me for squandering His resources on a sinful life such as mine?" Perhaps Newton put it best, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." But the Heavenly Father loves all His Sons, prodigal or dutiful. He wants both Gentile and Jew, the First and the Last, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad to come home to Him. Pain fills His heart when an older brother or a younger brother is lost. But, praise God, Hallelujah, there is Joy in the Presence of God over one Sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just souls that need no repentance, which measured in heaven's terms, means every soul is eternally precious to God your Father. Nothing would make your Father happier than to Arise and come to Him today. Will you? You see, as long as there is one sinner who refuses to repent, there is pain in heaven, pain in the heart of God.